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THE WILD MAN IN THE BIBLE AND THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

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The purposes of this article are, first, to examine ancient Near Eastern examples of what one scholar calls "a stock character of international folklore tradition," the wild man; and, second, to see how this tradition is utilized in the biblical Samson narrative (Judges 13–16).[1] For a working model of the species *homo ferus,* it is useful to begin with the best general study of the wild man, Richard Bernheimer's *Wild Men in the Middle Ages* (1952).[2]

[1] David E. Bynum, "Samson as a Biblical φὴρ ὀρεσκῶς," in *Text and Tradition: The Hebrew Bible and Folklore* (ed. Susan Niditch; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990) 64.

[2] Richard Bernheimer, *Wild Men in the Middle Ages: A Study in Art, Sentiment, and Demonology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1952). On the wild man, see also Edward Dudley and Maxmillian E. Novak, eds., *The Wild Man Within: An Image in Western Thought from the Renaissance to Romanticism* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1972); D. A. Wells, "The Wild Man from the Epic of Gilgamesh to Hartmann von Aue's Iwein," in *New Lecture Series* 78 (Belfast: Queen's University, 1975); Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), esp. chap. 8, "The Noble Savage Theme as Fetish" (pp. 183–96); and, most recently, the perceptive and comprehensive study by Roger Bartra, *Wild Men in the Looking Glass: The Mythic Origins of European Otherness* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994). Bartra's work, the most important study of the wild man since Bernheimer's, contains a perceptive analysis of the wild man tradition in the Bible and early church (chap. 2, "Barren Nature") that covers some of the same ground as this article. It omits, however, any discussion of the *laḥmu* or of Samson and is interested more in the "Judeo-Christian" concept of the wilderness and how it differs from the mental map of the Greco-Roman world than in tracing the hairy man as a traditional character in the Bible, as this article does.

There is also, in addition to the wild man, the wild woman, though I am not treating that subject here because such a character, frequently attested in medieval art and literature, is not as prominent in extant Near Eastern and biblical sources, though one could speak of the martial goddesses of the ancient Near East, such as Ishtar and Anat, as wild women, analogous to the Greek Amazons.

I. The Medieval Wild Man Tradition

Based on literary and iconographic analysis, Bernheimer observes that the most distinctive physical characteristic of the medieval wild man is hairiness.[3] In terms of size, the medieval wild man can be a giant (Gargantua) or a dwarf (Rumpelstiltskin); he is a "size-shifter."[4] Like the locals whom Gulliver encounters, the wild races, then, can be tiny Lilliputians, gigantic Brobdingnagians, or hirsute Yahoos.

In his mode of life, the wild man avoids human contact, living in inaccessible, unsettled places such as forests and mountains, sleeping in caves or crevices, and eating a primitive diet. For the most part, this hybrid creature eschews tools, but he may wield a crude weapon (a club, mace, or tree-trunk) and crawls on all fours. The wild man's personality is characterized by a "perpetual aggressiveness" and uncontrollable lust. He is, in Freudian terms, a walking (or crawling) Id. In the forest habitat, he is master in two respects. First, he is the match for and victor over the most savage rivals: bulls, boars, and bears. Second, he takes care of the animals and, because of his kinship with nature, knows about things that are unknown in human society; this latter feature makes the medieval wild man attractive to society, especially to alchemists of various persuasions, who seek to capture wild men and somehow force them to divulge secrets.[5]

The medieval wild man has three deficiencies: he cannot talk (he is literally βάρβαρος, "a babbler"); he cannot worship; and he is often insane.[6] The lunatic wild man could become a prophet or shaman, as in one Merlin tradition,[7] and sometimes found temporary relief from his madness "by the application of music as a palliative."[8]

[3] Bernheimer, *Wild Men*, 1. Most often, the entire body of the medieval wild man is matted with hair; less often, he is merely unshaven and unshorn.

[4] Ibid., 45.

[5] Ibid., 9, 10, 25, 26, 121.

[6] Ibid., 11–12.

[7] Ibid., 13. For the tradition of Merlin as wild man, see the ancient source, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini* (1150). For a discussion of this tradition, see Christopher Dean, *A Study of Merlin in English Literature from the Middle Ages to the Present Day* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1992) 1–6.

Bartra has a lengthy discussion of Merlin as a wild man (*Wild Men*, 63–74), to which I would make one correction. Bartra contends that Merlin's descent into wildness in response to the death of his brothers is a medieval innovation (p. 65). At the risk of sounding too much like Peter Jensen (*Das Gilgamesch-Epos in der Weltliteratur* [2 vols.; Strassburg: K. J. Trübner, 1906–28]), I must point out that this theme appears long before the Middle Ages. It is the death of his friend Enkidu that sends Gilgamesh into the steppe, where he roams as a wild man; thus, the theme of mourning as the trigger for an episode of wildness emerges at least two millennia earlier than the extant Merlin traditions.

[8] Bernheimer, *Wild Men*, 13. Cf. the effect that David's music has on the enraged Saul in 1 Sam 16:14–23.

This lapsed creature could be restored to a more human state through a gradual process of acculturation. Most commonly, a woman lured a wild man into human society, where he could begin adopting the refinements of civilization. Once in culture, wild men made excellent knights, their ferocious strength restrained and directed.[9] At the same time, a knight could turn wild in the wake of a failed romance or felled comrade. As Bernheimer says, "the limits between wildness and knighthood were fluid."[10] This fluid boundary between the temporary savagery of the hero figure, the knight, in a state of martial rage—his berserker fury—and the "normal," constitutional aggressiveness of the wild man can render taxonomic distinctions between these figures—the former, the defender of order; the latter, its offender—at times artificial. Bynum refers to the enraged warrior as a "monster-tamer," the representative of society who must match the monstrous Other in ferocity, and, thus, in the process becomes himself monstrous. In the martial arena, then, the hero can become a provisional wild man.[11] The transformation of the hero into wild man, the means by which urban society confronts the problem posed by and defends itself against the chaotic wild, inevitably creates a related problem with its own rich narrative and existential potential: the dangers associated with the return of the wild warrior to civilian life.[12]

There is another issue in the wild man tradition that we must consider: the relationship between wildness and foreignness. Any discussion of wild/civilized, like the terms insane/sane or heretical/orthodox, is a discussion of social boundaries.[13] The wild man characterization then is not only a feature in depictions of the bogeyman in the nearest forest. The same sort of subhuman traits are often attributed to peoples either geographically or chronologically remote. It appears that the reverse of Hartley's dictum holds true: just as "the past is a foreign country," foreigners are like the remote ancestors—crude, unfinished anthropological survivals.[14] As Bernheimer observes, if the wild man is residing

[9] Bernheimer, *Wild Men*, 8, 17, 18, 136–42.

[10] Ibid., 18.

[11] David E. Bynum, *The Dæmon in the Wood: A Study of Oral Narrative Patterns* (Cambridge, MA: Center for Study of Oral Literature, 1978) 220.

[12] As Plato has Socrates pose the problem in the dialogue with Glaucon,

> "'Then, Glaucon,' I [i.e., Socrates] said, 'with such natures as these [i.e.,the martial spirit of the guardians of the city], how are they to be prevented from behaving savagely towards one another and the other citizens?'
>
> 'By Zeus,' he [Glaucon] said, 'that will not be easy.'"
>
> (*The Republic of Plato*, Book II [trans. A. D. Lindsay; New York: E. P. Dutton, 1950] 68).

[13] As H. White puts it, describing a person or race as "wild" is to engage in "the technique of ostensive self-definition by negation" ("The Forms of Wildness: Archaeology of an Idea," in *Tropics of Discourse*, 5).

[14] The first line of L. P. Hartley's 1953 novel *The Go-Between* reads, "The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there."

nearby, he is a demonic figure; if far away, a representative of a monstrous race; if far away in time, a prehistoric specimen.[15]

II. The Wild Man in the Ancient Near East

The wild man tradition in Mesopotamia can be classified into three categories: (1) the hairy man, such as the literary character Enkidu or the iconographic figure, the *laḫmu;* (2) the subhuman barbarians or wild races; and (3) the warrior who temporarily is transformed into a wild man while in a state of martial rage.

Enkidu

Enkidu, as depicted in the Old Babylonian and Standard Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic, is our oldest extant literary representative of the wild man.[16] The introduction of Enkidu as the wild man appears to be an innovation of the second millennium BCE Old Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic, since in the earlier Sumerian stories about Gilgamesh, Enkidu was merely his colorless servant and companion.[17] This does not mean that the Old Babylonian poet invented this traditional figure of the wild man, but simply that the first time a fully realized wild man appears in literature is in the Akkadian Gilgamesh Epic. In the remarks that follow, I will draw both from the Old Babylonian version of the epic and the Standard Babylonian versions of the first millennium.

While the identification of Enkidu as wild man hardly requires demonstration, it is useful to point out the ways in which the traits and themes noted by Bernheimer for the medieval specimen correspond to Enkidu.[18] Virtually every characteristic noted for the medieval wild man can be found in the portrait of Enkidu. Enkidu is a foundling in the wilderness nursed and raised by his mother, a gazelle (*ṣabītu*), and his father, a wild donkey (*akkannu*).[19] In his

[15] Bernheimer, *Wild Men,* 86. For the monstrous races, see John B. Friedman, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).

[16] See Jeffrey H. Tigay, *The Evolution of the Gilgamesh Epic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), for a comprehensive treatment of the textual and tradition history of the Gilgamesh Epic.

[17] G. Dossin, "Enkidou dans l'«Epopée de Gilgameš»," *Bulletin de la classe des lettres et des sciences morales et politiques,* 5e Série, Tome XLII (Brussels: Palais des Académies, 1956) 583; Tigay, *Evolution,* 28–30.

[18] For studies of Enkidu, see, *inter alia,* Dossin, "Enkidou"; Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976) 195–219; Tigay, *Evolution,* 198–213; and William L. Moran, "Ovid's Blanda Voluptas and the Humanization of Enkidu," *JNES* 50 (1991) 121–27.

[19] These lines, which belong to the beginning of Tablet VIII of the Standard Version, are from a Sultantepe fragment, as seen in O. R. Gurney, "Two Fragments of the Epic of Gilgamesh from Sultantepe," *JCS* 8 (1954) 92. All references to the Gilgamesh Epic, unless otherwise noted,

primitive state, he is naked and covered with hair (Thompson, *GE* I ii 36–38) and may even be a quadruped, judging by his ability to keep pace with four-legged beasts of the steppe (Thompson, *GE* I iv 27).

In his appearance, diet, physical capabilities, and habitat, Enkidu is clearly on the side of animals, not humans. Before his conversion, Enkidu sides with nature, the sphere of his animal family and companions. At the same time, he sides against the hunters, a symbol of culture, interfering with their work by foiling their traps (Thompson, *GE* I iii 8–12, 35–39).[20] To give one example: whereas in the prologue to the epic, Gilgamesh was said to be able to open passes through mountains and "dig pits [*ḫērû būri*]" in the mountainside,[21] Enkidu, according to the hunter who first encountered him, "kept filling in the pits that I dug [*umtalli būri ša uḫarrû anāku*]" (Thompson, *GE* I iii 9, 36). Gilgamesh digs pits and Enkidu fills them up; the cultural man seeks to transform and control his environment while the natural man seeks to return things to their original untamed state.

As with many medieval wild men, a woman, Shamhat, is the agent of Enkidu's humanization. First through coitus and then through maternal attention and instruction, Shamhat humanizes Enkidu and then leads him into the city. Following his humanization, which comes at the cost of alienation from the animals and some loss of physical capabilities (e.g., "his speed" [*lasāššu*] [Thompson, *GE* I iv 28]), Enkidu's allegiances change. The opponent of culture becomes its defender: Enkidu guards the shepherds' hut where he stays en route to Uruk. Later, of course, Enkidu becomes a type of knight, the warrior companion of the hero Gilgamesh. This is not the only place in the epic in which we see the fluidity between warrior and wild man. After Enkidu's death, the hero Gilgamesh, as Abusch puts it, "roams like a wild man."[22] To be sure, there are points in the epic in which the distinction between wild man and warrior-king is clear: for example, in Tablet I, when Gilgamesh sits in his palace in Uruk and plots with the hunter while their nemesis, Enkidu, roams the steppe with his animal mates. Later, however, in Tablet II, the urban man, Gilgamesh, by suggesting a raid of Enlil's forest and an attack on the monster Humbaba—not out of necessity but out of competitiveness and hubris—seems far more savage and rapacious than his hairy companion, Enkidu, who reluctantly enters

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are from R. Campbell Thompson, *The Epic of Gilgamesh: Text, Transliteration, and Notes* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1930) (hereafter Thompson, *GE*).

[20] As G. S. Kirk says of Enkidu before his transformation, "Enkidu, although a man, is also the very antithesis of man and his works" (*Myth: Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970] 146).

[21] As restored by D. J. Wiseman, "A Gilgamesh Fragment from Nimrud," *Iraq* 37 (1975) 163; cf. Tigay, *Evolution*, 263.

[22] Tzvi Abusch, "Ishtar's Proposal and Gilgamesh's Refusal: An Interpretation of the *Gilgamesh Epic*, Tablet 6, Lines 1–79," *HR* 26 (1986) 181; see also Kirk, *Myth*, 139, 149.

his former haunts.[23] It should also be noted that women—first Siduri, the tavern-keeper, and later Utnapishtim's wife—figure in the wild man Gilgamesh's return to culture, just as Shamhat was the principal agent of Enkidu's domestication.[24]

The question of foreignness is also a crucial part of Enkidu's role in the epic. In writing about models for Enkidu's early life, Tigay distinguishes two camps among Assyriologists: according to Dossin, A. Leo Oppenheim, and others, Enkidu represents the rural barbarian who assimilates to Mesopotamian urban life; according to M. Jastrow and Tigay, Enkidu represents primordial man, as his epithet *lullû amēlu* indicates.[25] Since ideas about cultural and chronological primitives are often identical, as George Boas and Arthur Lovejoy pointed out, the dichotomy in the discussion of Assyriologists on this point is unnecessary.[26] Enkidu is both the subhuman foreigner, the archetype of the seminomadic inhabitants on the periphery of the Fertile Crescent, and at the same time the atavistic remnant of early humanity (*lullû amēlu*). Typically, both types of people are described in similar terms by their urban ethnographers.

In closing our discussion of Enkidu, we should mention also the different functions he serves, since they encompass virtually all the possible functions of the wild man. While still in nature, Enkidu is at the same time (1) the monster who threatens or interferes with urban culture, (2) the rural barbarian, and (3) the unfinished remnant of early humanity. Once he has been humanized and urbanized (noting Erica Reiner's observation of two stages in Enkidu's transformation),[27] (4) Enkidu literally acts as Bynum's "monster-tamer," return-

[23] As observed to me by David Bynum.

[24] For an analysis of women's roles in the epic, see Rivkah Harris, "Images of Women in the Gilgamesh Epic," in *Lingering Over Words: Studies in Ancient Near Eastern Literature in Honor of William L. Moran* (ed. Tzvi Abusch, J. Huehnergard, and P. Steinkeller; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990) 219–30.

[25] Tigay, *Evolution,* 198–213. The compound noun *lullû amēlu* is made up of two words that, taken separately, are synonyms: *lullû* is a Sumerian loanword in Akkadian and means "man" (*CAD* 9.242), the same as the Akkadian *amēlu/amīlu/awīlu*. Tigay's translation of the phrase, "primordial (a noun)-man," is based on the usage of *lullû* as a designation for humanity at the dawn of creation in *Atra-ḫasīs* and *Enūma eliš* (Tigay, *Evolution,* 10, 202, esp. n. 15). The meanings of *awīlu* (s.v. *amīlu* in *CAD* 1/2.48–57) include "human being," "grown man/male," and "gentleman."

[26] For definitions of cultural primitivism and chronological primitivism, see Arthur O. Lovejoy and George Boas, *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity* (1935; reprint, New York: Octagon, 1965) 1–22. Peter Machinist observes that the same is true for Mesopotamian literature, namely that similar images are used in literary descriptions of rural foreigners and of primordial humanity ("On Self-Consciousness in Mesopotamia," in *The Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilizations* [ed. S. N. Eisenstadt; Albany: SUNY Press, 1986] 189).

[27] Erica Reiner, "City Bread and Bread Baked in Ashes," in *Languages and Areas: Studies Presented to George V. Bobrinskoy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967) 118. These two distinct stages of Enkidu's development, humanization and then civilization, correspond to the

ing to the steppe to battle Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven. (5) Enkidu may even play the role of shaman, a minor theme in medieval wild man tradition, for during the journey to the Cedar Forest in Tablet IV he interprets the unsettling dreams of Gilgamesh. And from his creation until his death, Enkidu serves as (6) the feral double, the *Doppelgänger,* of the hero Gilgamesh. The latter function is one of the most persistent roles for the wild man in traditional and popular narrative: he is a secondary figure, a character actor, providing earthy ballast to the story of a primary man of culture, to whom he is the sidekick.

The wild man tradition, then, has Enkidu, the savage outsider to urban culture, as its prototype. We can also conclude that the full range of wild man themes and functions was available to storytellers in the ancient Near East.

The laḫmu

There is a figure in Mesopotamian art that, most likely, represents the iconographic expression of the wild man. The image is of a naked, bearded human figure whose distinguishing feature is long hair, parted down the middle and worn in six locks, three plaits to a side. The figure is often depicted in contest scenes with animals; he is occasionally unarmed but more often holds a staff or spade.[28] This figure, which appears throughout the Near East from the third millennium into the first, has been called variously the naked hero, the six-locked hero, the master of the beasts, and, by E. Unger, the wild man (*Wilder Mann*).[29] On the basis of the relatively few instances of correspondence between the image and text, F. A. M. Wiggermann suggests that the Akkadian name for this figure was *laḫmu,* "the hairy one."[30]

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general Mesopotamian view of the creation of humanity as "originally barbarous, civilized only [and subsequently] by the express intervention of the gods" (W. G. Lambert and A. R. Millard, *Atraḫasīs: The Babylonian Story of the Flood* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1969] 21).

[28] For illustrations of the *laḫmu,* see the drawings of Tessa Rickards on pp. 64–65 of Jeremy Black and Anthony Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia: An Illustrated Dictionary* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992); and those in the articles by F. A. M. Wiggermann (under "Mischwesen A") and Green ("Mischwesen B") in *Reallexikon der Assyriologie und Vorderasiastischen Archäologie,* Bd. 8, Lfg. 3/4 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1994).

Note that not every participant in a contest scene is a *laḫmu,* nor is every figure with the heroic hairstyle. These are separable motifs that can be applied to royal figures, for instance in the Achaemenid seals seen in Dominique Collon, *First Impressions: Cylinder Seals in the Ancient Near East* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988) 91–92 (## 418, 420, 423).

[29] F. A. M. Wiggermann, "Exit TALIM! Studies in Babylonian Demonology, I," *JEOL* 27 (1981–82) 90; Eckhard Unger, "Mischwesen," *Reallexikon der Vorgeschichte* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1927) 8.205–6.

[30] Wiggermann, "Exit TALIM!" 90–105; and *Babylonian Prophylactic Figures: The Ritual Texts* (Amsterdam: Free University Press, 1986), esp. 286–89.

See also *CAD* 9.41, which has two entries under *laḫmu.* Wiggermann distinguishes between *laḫmu* A, from a root meaning "to be hairy," and *laḫmu* B, "to be muddy." He associates the olden god *Laḫmu* from the *Enūma eliš,* one of a primordial theogonic pair, with the second meaning. For

The *laḫmu* must first be seen in the context of a wider demonic and teratologic series in Mesopotamian iconography, which included a menagerie of bird-men, bull-men, and other *Mischwesen*.[31] The *laḫmu*, "hairy one," has an ambivalent status: while the textual referents indicate a demonic or monstrous classification (e.g., the *laḫmu* is often paired with the *kusarikku*, the bull-man),[32] his physical features are wholly human, that is, heroic. Is the *laḫmu* then *homo sapiens* or *homo ferus*?

Keeping in mind Bernheimer's observations about the fluid boundary between medieval wild man and knight, it is possible, by analogy, that the *laḫmu* also straddles this boundary. In his recent anthology of Mesopotamian literature, Benjamin R. Foster translates the term into English as "hairy hero man," encapsulating the savage and heroic aspects of the figure.[33] The very etymology of the term ("hairy"), along with the iconography of the contest with the animals and the physical emphases on nakedness and hair, indicates clearly that the *laḫmu* fits into the larger horizon of the wild man tradition. In ritual texts *laḫmū* are apotropaic demons who, most frequently, guard doorways and gates, not unlike the gargoyles who watch over Gothic cathedrals or, as Bernheimer notes, the wild men who appear on door jambs and portals in Europe.[34] In this context, as doorkeeper or guardian of a house, we might say that the *laḫmu*, like many a wild man, has been domesticated—though by inclusion in the cult rather than through the love of a woman, the preferred, and more entertaining, method in wild man narratives—and now defends society. Once again, employing Bynum's terms, the monster has become the monster-tamer.

Before closing the discussion of the *laḫmu*, we must note a clear difference between this ethnic iconographic and mythological set of conventions, the *laḫmu*, and the generic character, the wild man. The *laḫmu*'s distinctive hairstyle—carefully parted, symmetrically plaited—implies some level of cultural artifice and is not the unruly mane of a Yeti or Sasquatch. At least two conclusions can be drawn from this. First, the term "wild man" connotes a spectrum of characters, not a single immutable form. Second, the Mesopotamian wild man, as it finds expression in the Akkadian Gilgamesh Epic and the *laḫmu* tradition, contains heroic potential, which underscores again the fundamental connection between the savage and the heroic.

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the view that both terms come from a single root "to be hairy," see W. G. Lambert, "The Pair Laḫmu-Laḫamu in Cosmology," *Or* 54 (1985) 189–202.

[31] See the drawings cited above in n. 28.

[32] Wiggermann, "Exit TALIM!" 103.

[33] Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* (2 vols.; Bethesda, MD: CDL, 1993) e.g., 275, 534, 538, 542, 894.

[34] Wiggermann, "Exit TALIM!" 101–2; Bernheimer, *Wild Men*, 47, 180–81.

Other Ancient Near Eastern Occurrences of the Wild Man

There is something of the wild races in many Mesopotamian descriptions of foreigners, such as in the late-third-(or early-second)-millennium Sumerian poem "The Marriage of Martu," where the god Martu is the eponymous deity of a rural group who live in the mountains without cooking, houses, or burial practices.[35] The "Marriage of Martu" also depicts, as best we can tell from the fragmentary text, the integration, or humanization, of the barbaric rube into urban life through marriage to a woman of the city—here, the goddess of Ninab, Adnigkidu.[36]

The Hittite story about Kessi from the second millennium, again a fragmentary text, has details suggestive of the wild man tradition.[37] Kessi is a great hunter who, after his marriage, loses interest in hunting and then, after the gods complain that they miss their offerings of game, reenters the mountains only to find that the animals are now hidden from him. Alienation from the animals as the price of the acquisition of culture is also a theme in the Gilgamesh Epic, as seen when the animals run from Enkidu after his sexual initiation into human society. In Phoenician tradition, as reflected through Philo of Byblos, writing in the second half of the first millennium, there is the wild man Ousōos, the first hunter as well as the feral sibling of Hypsouranios, the culture hero who invents huts.[38]

The warrior as provisional wild man appears in literary contexts, such as "Erra and Ishum" and the Tukulti-Ninurta Epic. In the former, an eighth-century BCE Assyrian work, the divine warrior Erra lolls around the house with his wife, Mami, until the Sibitti, his seven comrades, challenge his manhood

[35] For a transliteration, translation, and commentary, see Samuel Noah Kramer, "The Marriage of Martu," in *Bar-Ilan Studies in Assyriology Dedicated to Pinḥas Artzi* (ed. Jacob Klein and Aaron Skaist; Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1990) 11–27; Jacob Klein, "Additional Notes to 'the Marriage of Martu,'" in *Kinattūtu ša dārâti: Raphael Kutscher Memorial Volume* (ed. A. S. Rainey; Tel Aviv: Institute of Archaeology, 1993) 93–106; and K. van der Toorn, "Amurru," in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (ed. K. van der Toorn, B. Becking, and P. W. van der Horst; Leiden: Brill, 1995) 54–55.

[36] For a discussion of Mesopotamian stereotypes about foreigners as subhuman, see Jerrold S. Cooper, *The Curse of Agade* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), esp. Excursus B, "The Subhuman Barbarian" (pp. 30–31); and Machinist, "On Self-Consciousness in Mesopotamia," 183–202.

[37] Henry Hoffner, trans., and Gary Beckman, ed., *Hittite Myths* (SBLWAW 2; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990) 67–68.

[38] Ronald S. Hendel discusses this Phoenician pair of twin culture heroes, along with Egyptian Seth and Horus, Mesopotamian Enkidu and Gilgamesh, and biblical Esau and Jacob (*The Epic of the Patriarch: The Jacob Cycle and the Narrative Traditions of Canaan and Israel* [HSM 42; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987] 111–31). For the Phoenician tradition, see Harold W. Attridge and Robert Oden, *Philo of Byblos, The Phoenician History: Introduction, Critical Text, Translation, Notes* (CBQMS 9; Washington: Catholic Biblical Association, 1981).

and coax him out of the house and into the steppe.[39] Once in the arena of nature and battle—the steppe, *ṣēru*, is both—Erra forsakes domestic comforts for martial, even natural, austerity[40] and goes on a rampage of violence. In the thirteenth-century BCE Tukulti-Ninurta Epic, the Assyrian warriors, excited by the goddess of war Ishtar, are transformed into wild men: they strip themselves of their armor and, according to one description, charge into the Kassite forces like lions; in another, they charge like the mythological Anzu, a creature fashioned from bird and lion elements.[41]

III. The Wild Man in the Bible

The Hebrew Bible has its own roster of hairy men, great hunters, giants, and feral siblings of culture heroes. For many of these, such as Nimrod, the גבר ציד ("warrior-hunter") of Gen 10:8–11, one can imagine that entire cycles existed in popular narrative, though the biblical tradition contains only brief allusion. Other hunter figures include Ishmael and Esau. Ishmael's early life is associated with the מדבר ("wilderness," Gen 16:7; 21:14, 20, 21); he is called a פרא אדם ("onager-man," Gen 16:12; cf. Enkidu as *akkannu*, "onager," in Thompson *GE* VIII ii 8) and gains renown as a bow-man.[42] In the Genesis accounts, Ishmael functions as the feral double of the patriarch Isaac and as the ancestor of a foreign group of seminomads. Esau is called an איש שדה ("man of the field," Gen 25:27) and an איש שׂער ("hairy man," Gen 27:11). This famous

[39] For "Erra and Ishum," see the critical edition of Luigi Cagni (*L'epopea di erra* [Studi semitici 34; Rome: Università di Roma, 1969]); and, in English translation, Cagni, *The Poem of Erra* (SANE 1/3; Malibu, CA: Undena, 1977); Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989) 282–315; and Foster, *Before the Muses*, 2.771–805.

[40] Foster's translation of the Sibitti's speech to Erra captures the austere, anticultural code of the warrior:

> However toothsome city bread, it holds nothing to the campfire loaf,
> However sweet fine beer, it holds nothing to water from a skin,
> The terraced palace holds nothing to the [wayside] sleeping spot!
> (Foster, "Erra and Ishum," *Before the Muses*, 2.775).

For further discussion of the motif of the anticultural code of the warrior, see Reiner, "City Bread."

[41] The critical edition of the Tukulti-Ninurta Epic is that of Peter Machinist ("The Epic of Tukulti-Ninurta I: A Study of Middle Assyrian Literature" [diss., Yale University, 1978]); see also Foster's English translation, *Before the Muses*, 1.209–29. For the passages cited, see ibid., 1.223, 225.

Joan G. Westenholz has observed a similar phenomenon in Akkadian royal inscriptions: "The heroes' lust for battle can turn into a superhuman fury and frenzy and as such they are often compared to wild animals or to some irresistible power of nature" ("Heroes of Akkad," *JAOS* 103 [1983] 332).

[42] Incidentally, Bartra (*Wild Men*, 45) notices that the KJV translates פרא אדם in Gen 16:12 as "wild man."

hunter even exudes the earthy aroma of nature (Gen 27:27).[43] Esau, like Ishmael, functions both as the feral twin and as the representative of a rural, foreign ethnic group.[44] Though these wild men begin life in the Israelite sphere, they end up as foreigners, outsiders to Israel.

There is much of the wild man in the Yahwist's portrait of Adam in Genesis 2–3.[45] The first man lives unclothed in the primeval garden with his animal companions. The crucial event in Adam's transformation is the creation of Eve, the woman who leads him to take the decisive action that results in his movement from nature to culture.

The wild man as shaman can be seen with Elijah, איש בעל שער ("lord of hair," 2 Kgs 1:8) and frequenter of caves (1 Kgs 19:9), and with his successor Elisha, who sends bears to do his bidding (2 Kgs 2:23–24). Note that the epithets for Elijah and Esau, איש בעל שער and איש שער, respectively, are the semantic equivalent of Akkadian *laḫmu*. With Elijah, as Bartra notes, one of the peculiarities of the biblical wild man tradition can be observed: the wild man as the prophet in the wilderness, a theme that will become more prominent in later Christian monastic tradition.[46]

The wild races also appear in several places in the Bible, especially in portraits of the various atavistic giants whom the Israelites encounter in the course of their march through Transjordan and entry into Canaan,[47] in the notices about various Philistine freaks (the giants and polydigitals in the books of Samuel),[48] and in the description of the miserable, subhuman poor of Job 24:5: "wild asses in the wilderness," פראים במדבר. Apart from Samson, perhaps the

[43] Enkidu probably had a notable scent also, which was changed after his encounter with Shamhat. This caused his former animal companions to flee from him, since "his body was too clean," *ullala pagaršu* (Thompson, *GE* I iv 26).

[44] For more on Esau as the man of nature opposed to the man of culture, see Hendel, *Epic of the Patriarch*, 111–31; and Theodor H. Gaster, *Myth, Legend, and Custom in the Old Testament* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969) 163–64.

[45] As Tigay notes (*Evolution*, 202), the first to observe similarities between the respective stories of Enkidu in the Gilgamesh Epic and Adam in Genesis was Morris Jastrow, "Adam and Eve in Babylonian Literature," *AJSL* 15 (1899) 193–214. For more recent discussions of Adam as a type of Enkidu figure, see E. A. Speiser, *Genesis* (AB; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964) 27–28; John A. Bailey, "Initiation and the Primal Woman in Gilgamesh and Genesis 2-3," *JBL* 89 (1970) 137–50; J. Tigay, "Paradise," *EncJud* 13.78–82; Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984) 226; and R. Oden, *The Bible Without Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987) esp. chap. 3, "Grace or Status? Yahweh's Clothing of the First Humans."

[46] Bartra, *Wild Men*, 52–62.

[47] In the course of their march through Transjordan and entry into Canaan, the Israelites encounter various gigantic peoples reminiscent of an antediluvian race (Gen 6:4): the Anakim (Num 13:22, 33; Deut 1:28; 2:11, 21; and Judg 1:20); Rephaim, including Og whose bed was over thirteen feet long (Deut 2:10–11; 3:11); Emim (Deut 2:10–11); and Zamzummim (Deut 2:20).

[48] Goliath (1 Sam 17:4–11; 2 Sam 21:19), Ishbi-benob (2 Sam 21:16), Saph (2 Sam 21:18), and one nameless polydigital (2 Sam 21:20).

most memorable wild man in the Hebrew Bible is Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4, the great king of "all peoples, nations, and languages that live throughout the earth" (Dan 4:1) who is transformed into a wild man, just to show who the true uncouth foreigner is.

The New Testament also employs traditions about the wild man or the wild races. John the Baptist lives in the wilderness, eats a primitive diet, wears animal skins, dies through the agency of a woman, and, above all, functions as the secondary, wild counterpart to the primary hero.[49] The Gospel traditions about Jesus' temptation in the wilderness express the motif of the prophet who enters the desert, like Elijah or John. Certainly, Jesus is not a wild man per se, but the odd detail in Mark 1:13 ("he was with the wild beasts") does contain an echo of Enkidu as well as of Elijah. The Gerasene demoniac (Matt 8:28–34; Mark 5:1–20; Luke 8:26–39), especially in Luke, resembles a member of the wild races, eschewing clothes and houses (Luke 8:27). The concept of the savage races also can be seen in the description of Paul's visit to Malta (Acts 28) where the dichotomy of wild and civilized is used to ironic and comic effect. As Luke writes, "The natives [literally "barbarians," οἱ βάρβαροι] showed us unusual kindness ["philanthropy," φιλανθρωπίαν]" (Acts 28:2), in contrast to the rough handling the missionaries received from their cultured hosts in urban Asia Minor.

Samson as Wild Man

In Samson we have the Bible's most extensive display of the wild man tradition, as Hermann Gunkel (in 1913) and more recently David Bynum (1990) and Susan Niditch (1990) have pointed out.[50] In his definitive essay, Gunkel

[49] The traditions about John explicitly compare him to Elijah (e.g., Matt 17:9–13; Mark 9:11–13; Luke 1:17). John's birth story (Luke 1:5–80) has parallels with the book of Judges' and Pseudo-Philo's versions of Samson's birth. In the latter, Samson's mother (there named Eluma; she is unnamed in Judges 13), after hearing the angel's birth announcement, takes a vow of silence until the birth takes place; cf. Zechariah's dumbness in Luke 1 (Pseudo-Philo 42 in *OTP* 2.355–56).

[50] Hermann Gunkel, "Simson," in *Reden und Aufsätze* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1913) 38–64; David E. Bynum, "Samson," 57–73; Susan Niditch, "Samson as Culture Hero, Trickster, and Bandit: The Empowerment of the Weak," *CBQ* 52 (1990) 608–24. Although they observe wild man traits in Samson, some hesitate to apply the term "wild man" to him as he is depicted in the extant text of Judges 13–16; see Niditch, "Samson," 613; and James L. Crenshaw, *Samson: A Secret Betrayed, a Vow Ignored* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1978) 18. In addition to the above, important recent studies of Samson include J. Cheryl Exum, "Literary Patterns in the Samson Saga: An Investigation of Rhetorical Style in Biblical Prose" (diss., Columbia University, 1976); Rüdiger Bartelmus, *Heroentum in Israel und seiner Umwelt* (ATANT 65; Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1979) esp. 79–111; Yair Zakovitch, חיי שמשון (*The Life of Samson*) (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1982); and Mieke Bal, "Delilah Decomposed: Samson's Talking Cure and the Rhetoric of Subjectivity," in *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987) 37–67.

brought the discussion of Samson down to earth: from Samson as a solar hero (in the fashion of nineteenth-century comparative mythology) to that of Samson as a Natural Man.[51] There are many similarities between the biblical Samson and the medieval wild man. Though the Bible does not say a word about body hair, Samson's hair, uncut since birth, is his signal trait. Samson establishes his credentials as master of beasts in his inaugural feat of wrestling a lion (Judg 14:5–6) and later by capturing and controlling the foxes (Judg 15:4–5): Samson leads an army of foxes, rather than men, against the Philistines.[52] Samson sleeps in a rock crevice (Judg 15:8), and he eats wild honey (Judg 14:9–10) and drinks neither יין (grape wine) nor שכר (beer? date wine?) (Judg 13:4, 7, 14); that is, he eschews city food. Samson usually works without tools—he tears the lion apart and uproots the city gate of Gaza bare-handed (Judg 14:6; 16:3)—and when he does require a tool, it is drawn directly from the animal world, the jawbone of an ass (Judg 15:15).[53] Samson displays the perpetual aggressiveness of the wild man in his episodes of frenzied violence (Judg 14:6, 19; 15:14–15). His relationships with culture are of the wild man type: he is irresistibly drawn to culture by women and, once in culture, he is pressured to divulge secrets (Judg 14:15–17; 16:5–17). Like so many wild men of myth and fairy tale, the Danite beast is humanized by a woman, Delilah, since the text repeatedly notes that after his hair is cut, Samson will "become like one of the human beings" (הייתי כאחד, האדם Judg 16:7, 11, and, with a slight variation, v. 17 in the MT; see also v. 13 in the LXX, which has fallen out of the MT due to a haplography).[54] As it turns out, however, Samson's humanization—or, if you prefer, domestication—does not take, and in the end he reverts to wildness.

The differences between the biblical Samson and the medieval wild man are also noteworthy. In the Bible, Samson is neither a giant nor a quadruped.[55] In postbiblical Jewish tradition, however, Samson does acquire gigantic dimensions and is said to have crawled on his belly.[56] Such postbiblical Jewish materi-

[51] It should be noted that George Foot Moore, two decades earlier, pointed the discussion in this direction: "the legend [of Samson] . . . has its roots in the earth, not in the sky" (*Judges* [ICC; Edinburgh: Clark, 1895] 365).

[52] For examples of ancient Near Eastern iconographic depictions of the master-of-the-beasts motif, see Othmar Keel, *Jahwes Entgegnung an Ijob* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978) 88–124.

[53] As Niditch writes, Samson fights "not with a culture-intensive, humanly designed weapon, but with a found or gathered tool worthy of a cave-man" ("Samson," 614).

[54] Moore, *Judges*, 355.

[55] Although Bynum wonders, "[H]ow does he run down three hundred foxes if he isn't a kind of centaur?" ("Samson," 62).

[56] *B. Soṭa* 10a. These developments can be explained in light of the techniques of haggadic exegesis. Samson must have been a giant to have borne aloft, as a carpenter shoulders a door frame, the city gate of Gaza. The tradition that Samson was lame in both legs results from midrashic exegesis of the tribal blessing for Dan in Gen 49:17 ("Dan will be a snake alongside the road"), which

als may very well reflect ancient popular traditions about Samson, and, if so, they suggest that Samson was a wild man of sorts in other tellings of his legend—we should bear in mind that, in all likelihood, the account in Judges 13–16 represents only one telling of this legend. Incidentally, there are other correspondences between postbiblical Samson traditions and particular European wild man traditions. In regard to the medieval wild man's penchant for wielding tree trunks and saplings, there is a medieval Central European iconographic tradition of Samson as tree-uprooter, as observed by A. Scheiber.[57] Joseph Fontenrose has noted the correspondence between a rabbinic tradition about Samson's hair and the hair of the Celtic hero of the Ulster cycle, Cú Chulainn. According to the rabbis, when the spirit rushed over Samson, his hairs became stiff and knocked against each other, producing a ringing sound. Likewise, during Cú Chulainn's fits of martial rage (his *ríastarthae*, analogous to Samson's moments of being "rushed over" [from צלח] by the "breath of YHWH") his hair stiffened and stood on end.[58]

There are other ways, however, in which Samson does not conform to the stereotypical wild man. As Niditch points out, Samson has a human family and, most unlike the wild man, Samson talks.[59] In fact, Samson not only talks, he riddles (Judg 14:14), boasts (Judg 15:16), and prays (Judg 15:18; 16:28).

The fact that Samson prays underscores what is perhaps the key difference between him and the medieval wild man. Samson is not alienated from the deity, at least as long as he maintains his connection with nature in the form of unshorn hair. It is YHWH's divine messenger who establishes the anticultural terms by which Samson will live: prohibitions against consuming alcoholic beverages and cutting his hair (Judg 13:4–5, 7, 14). It is YHWH's spirit that moves over Samson in the prelude to certain feats (Judg 14:6, 19; 15:14). YHWH departs from Samson at the moment the latter becomes captive to culture in the form of Delilah's shearing of his seven locks (Judg 16:20). This is clearly a reversal of the typical wild man situation: whereas the medieval wild man is a lapsed creature, Samson becomes alienated from God only when he allows himself to be domesticated.

Should we call Samson a wild man or not? There are clear echoes of the

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led to the idea that Samson crawled rather than walked. Nevertheless, it is interesting that these later traditions about Samson—he was a giant and was not *homo erectus*—are motifs also found in wild man traditions.

[57] A. Scheiber, "Samson Uprooting a Tree," *JQR* 50 (1959–60) 176–80; idem, "Further Parallels to the Figure of Samson the Tree-Uprooter," *JQR* 52 (1961–62) 35–40.

[58] Joseph Fontenrose, *Orion: The Myth of the Hunter and the Huntress* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981) 221–22; the midrashic source is *Lev. Rab.* 8.2. For the legend of Cú Chulainn, see *Early Irish Myths and Sagas* (trans. Jeffrey Gantz; London: Penguin, 1981). For more on Cú Chulainn and the Irish wild man, see Pádraig O Riain, "A Study of the Irish Legend of the Wild Man," *Eigse: A Journal of Irish Studies* 14 (1972) 179–206.

[59] Niditch, "Samson," 613.

Mesopotamian *laḫmu* tradition in the biblical Samson. First, there is the peculiar detail in Judg 16:13–14 that Samson wore his hair in seven "locks" (מחלפות), which can be understood as an Israelite variation on the six locks of the *laḫmu*.[60] Second, Samson's feat of wrestling a lion (Judg 14:5–6) represents the verbal depiction of the familiar contest scene of the *laḫmu* subduing a beast. It is the same traditional motif—what we might call a verbal icon—expressed in a narrative rather than visual medium.[61]

Samson is also comparable to the wild man Enkidu. Both are hairy and share a preference for natural habitats: Enkidu on the steppe, Samson among the crags at Eitam (Judg 15:8). Both become captive to culture through the agency of a woman. Neither is acquainted with the *haute cuisine* of urban society: Samson, due to his Nazirite vow, is forbidden from partaking of beer, שכר; Enkidu, before his humanization, knew neither bread nor "beer," *šikar* (a cognate of the above Hebrew *šēkār*).[62] We also noted that the Mesopotamian wild man tradition includes, in addition to the hairy man, the warrior who under certain conditions turns wild, such as when Gilgamesh enters the steppe after Enkidu's death or when the Assyrian warriors go berserk under the inspiration of Ishtar. Samson's episodes of frenzied aggression (Judg 14:6, 19; 15:14–15), also inspired by a deity, conform to the latter pattern. Of course, Samson is not only a wild man, for the biblical Samson is a composite figure and his legend draws on many traditional character types—Niditch, for instance, mentions those of trickster, culture hero, and social bandit. He cannot be understood, however, apart from the wild man tradition, both in its specific ancient Near Eastern manifestations and within the larger international horizon of its folkloric development.[63]

This brings me to my final remark about Samson: the strange point of view of the story. A very common folktale is one in which a devastating monster threatens the city, but a hero emerges to defeat the agent of chaos. But this story in Judges adopts the point of view of the monster, the wild man, who comes down from the highlands to threaten urban society in the lowlands. This subhuman Other is the hero. Throughout the saga, Samson is the opponent of

[60] For studies of this iconographic motif in the Samson saga, see Robert Wenning and Erich Zenger, "Der siebenlockige Held Simson: Literarische und ikonographische Beobachtungen zu Ri 13-16," *BN* 17 (1982) 43–55; and R. Mayer-Opificius, "Simson, der sechslockige Held?" *UF* 14 (1982) 149–51. The first, it appears, to explicitly connect Samson's seven locks with the figures on Mesopotamian reliefs was Aleida G. van Daalen (*Simson* [SSN 8; Assen: Van Gorcum, 1966] 116–17).

[61] The above studies of Wenning and Zenger, and Mayer-Opificius also note the lion-slaying as part of a larger complex that includes the special hairstyle, and they relate the whole to the Mesopotamian tradition.

[62] Thompson, *GE* II iii 8 (Old Babylonian).

[63] Niditch, "Samson."

urban culture: he torches orchards, turning worked land to waste land; he uproots city gates, the barrier that separates the city from the wild; and, finally, he tears down the architectural and cultural centerpiece of society, the temple.[64] This adoption of the wild man as Israel's own hero is an inversion of the expected point of view, which pits "Us"—settled, ordered, cultured—against "Them"—the crude barbarians.

This raises the larger question of Israelite cultural attitudes, as reflected in the Bible, toward the wilderness, toward the wild. As Shemaryahu Talmon has demonstrated, the מדבר (or its related terms) is for the most part an uninhabitable, demonic place where exotic and mythical creatures dwell (e.g., Num 20:5; Deut 8:15; Isa 13:21; 34:14; Jer 2:6; Ps 107:4–5).[65] Beyond this, the wilderness is an important literary motif in the Bible, since it was the site of Israel's wanderings between exodus and settlement. Talmon has described the function of this motif in this way: "[T]he wilderness is never presented as a goal in itself, but rather serves as the setting of an imposing rite of passage prior to Israel's reaching the Promised Land."[66] In post-Pentateuchal tradition, as in Hosea and the prophets of the exilic period, the wilderness is the liminal place to which Israel must return, not to abide but to be transformed before returning to the settled land. In short, the wilderness can have a creative, instrumental function.[67]

By analogy we might say that the biblical attitude toward the wild man is similarly ambivalent, not wholly negative. We should note the sympathetic treatment afforded the wild men Ishmael and Esau—while both are ultimately outsiders, they are integrally related to the patriarchs—and rural groups such as the Rechabites (Jer 35:1-19).

More to the point, biblical traditions about Israel's beginnings adopt the point of view of the outsider to urban culture, whether in traditions about the exodus and wanderings in the wilderness or about the settlement, in relation to the Canaanite city-states or the Philistine pentapolis. One particular tradition worth mentioning is that of Deut 32:10, where the people Israel is depicted in wild man terms as a foundling in the desert adopted by a divine godfather,

[64] This description of Samson's campaign against the structures of Philistine urban culture echoes that of Niditch ("Samson," 614–15).

[65] Shemaryahu Talmon, "Wilderness," *IDBSup*, 946; see also Talmon's "The Desert Motif in the Bible and in Qumran Literature," in *Literary Studies in the Hebrew Bible* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1993) 216–54.

[66] Talmon, "Wilderness," 947.

[67] The anthropologist Bartra, who does not appear to know Talmon's work on the wilderness in the Bible, also observes the liminal function of the desert in the specific cases of Job and Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 4). Job's trials leave him abandoned in the wilderness; Nebuchadnezzar's madness drives him into the wilderness, where he lives as an animal. In both cases, Bartra observes that the protagonist ultimately encounters God through this experience: Job does so when the Lord appears in chap. 38; Nebuchadnezzar does not actually meet God while in the wilderness, but when he does return to his senses, he praises the Israelite God (Bartra, *Wild Men*, 44–48).

YHWH, who nursed his son with honey from a rock (v. 13). Also, as Gunkel noted, in both the story of the crossing of the Reed Sea and the story of David and Goliath, Israel or its heroic representative defeats a technologically superior foe through the agency of Nature itself (e.g., at the Reed Sea), the natural object at hand (e.g., David's stone plucked from a wadi; cf. Samson's jawbone of an ass), or the unfinished weapon (David's "sticks" [מקלות] versus the "sword, spear, and javelin" of his Philistine opponent in 1 Sam 17:43–45; cf. Shamgar's ox-goad in Judg 3:31 and the shepherd's staff of Benaiah in 2 Sam 23:21).[68] Samson too triumphs over the Philistines not because of superior culture, technology, or intelligence—the Philistines are the urbane tricksters here—but because his feral strength, fueled by the Spirit of YHWH, is irrepressible. The Bible adopts the point of view of Israel as the *Naturmensch,* to use Gunkel's term, in certain traditions about the premonarchical period. It is a fitting perspective for a people who repeatedly throughout their history found themselves in the position of outsider—that is, the wild race, relative to other, more powerful urban cultures of the Near East—and who used this "counteridentity" as proof of divine favor.[69]

Just as, however, the wilderness is never a terminus for Israel but, as Talmon put it, a liminal place of transformation, the wild man Samson too represents a means to an end. Wild men typically have an instrumental role in narrative. They solve problems for society (usually unintentionally and solely in reaction to egocentric appetites or personal slights), winning battles and slaying dragons, but they often find no place in society for themselves. Samson's mission, though unknown to him, is clear to readers from before his birth: "he is to begin to deliver the Israelites from the hands of the Philistines" (Judg 13:5). By single-handedly killing several thousand Philistines, Samson completes his destructive mission. This destruction is the prelude to the creation of a nation in its own right, but the task of building up and maintaining culture belongs to others. For Samson himself, there is no place after he has torn down the temple of Dagon at Gaza. Since the point of view of the story does not permit a Philistine hero to defeat the monster—here, the monster, the wild man, is the hero—Samson must do it himself. At the moment of his greatest triumph, then, Samson pulls down the pillars of the temple, killing countless Philistines and, at the same time, erasing himself from the surface of the earth.

[68] Gunkel, "Simson," 40.

[69] Peter Machinist, "The Question of Distinctiveness in Ancient Israel," in *Essential Papers on Israel and the Ancient Near East* (ed. Frederick E. Greenspahn; New York: NYU Press, 1991) 434.